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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000369

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SUBJECT: MAY 7 FELTMAN-SHAPIRO MEETING IN DAMASCUS: HUMAN
RIGHTS AND MURAD CASE

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b, d.

11. (S/NF) Summary: In a wide-ranging May 7 meeting with a Syrian delegation led by FM Muallim, NEA Acting Assistant Secretary Feltman and NSC/NENA Senior Director Shapiro argued that showing more leniency to Syrian prisoners of conscience would be the right thing to do and could help Syria's image in the U.S. and Europe. Muallim asked whether the same U.S. human rights concerns applied to the some 1300 al-Qaeda-linked Salafists in Syrian jails ("Should we release them, too?" he asked.) Muallim defended the Syrian judicial process, and rejected interference in Syria's sovereign affairs. In response to Feltman's question on whether any progress had been made on the Murad child abduction case, Muallim said the Syrian police had been notified. End Summary.

12. (S/NF) Returning to Damascus two months after their March 7 visit, NEA Acting Assistant Secretary Jeffrey Feltman and NSC Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa Dan Shapiro met May 7 for four-and-a-half hours with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallim, Vice Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad, and President Asad's Political and Media Advisor Bouthaina Shaaban. Charge and Pol-Econ Chief (notetaker) accompanied Feltman and Shapiro. Muallim's Chief of Staff Bassam Sabagh joined the Syrian side. This cable provides their discussion on human rights issues. It should be read with septel reports the bilateral relationship, Iraq, sanctions, Palestinian issues, Syrian-Israeli peace talks, Iran and, Lebanon.

Feltman Urges Positive Steps on Human Rights

13. (S/NF) Acting A/S Feltman told Muallim that, just as the U.S. image had suffered in the Arab world, Syria faced a public opinion problem in the U.S. He suggested Syria could improve its image in the U.S. and Europe if it took positive actions on human rights issues. Steps such as releasing prisoners of conscience Riad Seif and Michel Kilo were the right thing to do and might help Damascus overcome its negative image abroad. Muallim said Riad Seif was currently in the hospital receiving treatment for prostate cancer. (Note: According to Seif's daughter the same day, Seif was not in the hospital. End Note.) NSC Senior Director Shapiro and Feltman responded Seif and Kilo both remained in custody,

and this fact was hurting Syria's reputation.

¶4. (S/NF) Muallim replied by asking whether the U.S. was as equally concerned about the human rights of some 1300 al-Qaeda militants in Syrian jails whom Syrian authorities had captured trying to enter Iraq. "Should we release them, too?" he asked. "Will you take them, or should we release them to Iraq?" Syria should be able to hold terror suspects legally or render them into the custody of their country of origin, contended Feltman. The comparison of al-Qaeda suspects to prisoners of conscience, however, was hardly appropriate. Muallim said that 1300 cases should be of more concern to the U.S. than Michel Kilo or Riad Seif.

¶5. (S/NF) Feltman explained that the Obama administration had taken difficult decision about past human rights practices and had admitted the U.S. had failed to live up to the high principles to which Americans aspired. Syria, too, could benefit from this experience. Recognizing and correcting faulty human rights practices was the right thing to do and would improve Syria's image. Presidential Advisor Shaaban replied that Kilo, Seif, and others had received trials and were sentenced according to Syrian law. Muallim interjected that "Nothing will improve our image in Washington and the West except positive words from the new administration." Muallim urged Feltman and Shapiro to recognize that the previous U.S. administration had consistently attacked Syria and damaged its reputation. "It's your duty to change this. Say nice things about us in Washington," he urged. Doing so would help to change anti-U.S. views within the Syrian regime, Muallim claimed.

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¶6. (S/NF) Shapiro answered that Washington had made positive statements, but it would do so on human rights only if Syria did something to deserve it. "We deserve it," responded Muallim. "Do it and you'll see more positive moves from our side. We're ready to move," he said. President Asad had openly praised President Obama, he said. The U.S. should follow suit. Feltman suggested Syria also had a responsibility to shape the relationship positively.

Murad Case Update

¶7. (S/NF) Acting A/S Feltman thanked Muallim for meeting with the Embassy's Consul General to discuss the Murad child abduction case. Muallim replied that he had referred the case to the police to check on possible locations for the children.

¶8. (SBU) Acting A/S Feltman and Senior Director Shapiro cleared this message.
CONNELLY